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Courtesy Les Arts Français

THE END OF THE DAY. FROM A CHIAROSCURO WOODCUT BY AUGUSTE LEPIÈRE



Courtesy Ed. Sagot, Edit., Paris

THE FUGITIVES. FROM A WOODCUT BY AUGUSTE LEPÈRE

The Wood-Engravings of Auguste Lepère

BY RENÉ D'AVRIL

FRENCH engraving has lost one of its greatest masters, Auguste Lepère. This artist, so perfect, at once painter and adept in all of the processes of engraving—of the oldest, as well as the most modern; of the most complex and most delicate, as well as of the simplest—died on the 20th of November, 1918, in the village of Domm, in Dordogne.

Auguste Lepère constantly exhibited, as painter and as engraver, in the Salons of the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts. He was born in 1849. He had, therefore, seen two wars. This is much, even for a professional of the *manière noire*. But while, after 1870, the graver could lay stress on the sombre shades without exaggerating, from 1914, on the contrary, it seemed as though color was to have its

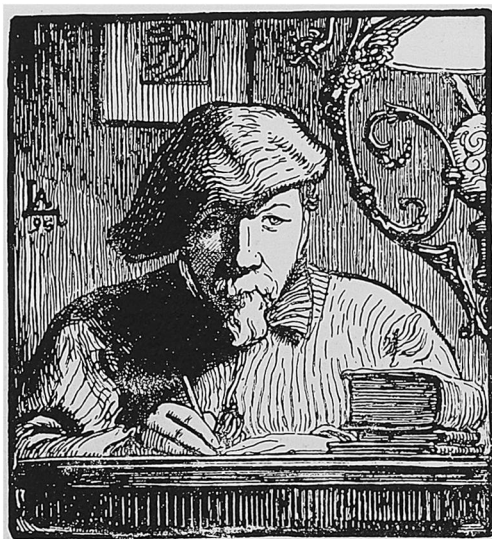
revenge, and, from the very opposition of shadows, lights were to surge more clear and vibrant. The artist had felt it, and nothing equals the calm and, I might say, almost heroic strength of the beautiful compositions, eighteen in number, after the style of wood-engravers, with which he adorned the pages of the *History of the War*, by Gabriel Hanotaux. We are also indebted to Lepère for a poster for that noted and inspiring exhibition of war works in the Hall *Du Jeu de Paume*, Paris, in 1915.

Above all, he brought out of the great epic, which France and the world were living, the features of suffering. King Peter of Serbia, in his imposing grandeur, as Prince Errant, stamped by fatality; some fugitives; a guard of the lines of communication, simple and realistic—

these figures are worthy of illustrating anew *Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre*, which the illustrious predecessor of Lepère, Jacques Callot of Lorraine, engraved in the Seventeenth century, in commemoration of the Thirty Years' War. Now and then, the thought of the artist, escaping from direct contemplation, would rise to the heights of philosophical allegory, in such instances recalling another of his ancestors, Albert Dürer, the engraver of the *Melancholia*. Again, it would be, for example, such plates as *Les mauvaises passions et la mort fondant sur le monde*.

I mentioned first the war works of Auguste Lepère, because, constituting, as they do, together with a few landscapes of Dordogne (of which, one is unfinished), the last productions of the engraver, they show the benefit of all of his acquired knowledge; secondly, because they were among the most perfect of his works; and, lastly, because they proved how much the artist, far from living apart from his epoch, followed the traditions of the engravers of former times: the Callots, the Israel Silvestres, the Abraham Bosses. By identifying himself closely with the life of his time, he brought out its soul in art, closely reproducing reality.

Equally does the whole life of Auguste Lepère tend to express, in a wonderful number of ways, all that he has understood and felt. More than this, he had to see with the eyes of an artist, that is, to disregard the unnecessary detail and to bring out the essential, which is not always possible, even to the most gifted painter, influenced as he is by the eternal delusion of color. Lepère owes much to the Impressionists, because, through their



Portrait of himself. A woodcut by Auguste Lepère

influence, he was freed from attachment to the anecdote and subject type of pictures. He was, however, able to recognize the great limitation in their art, a limitation much less obvious, it is true, in a painting than in an *aqua fortis*, which is a perceptible sacrifice of form to the detriment of the lines. To the engraver, the lines and the drawing are the essentials of his art. Let us retrace our steps in this study. We

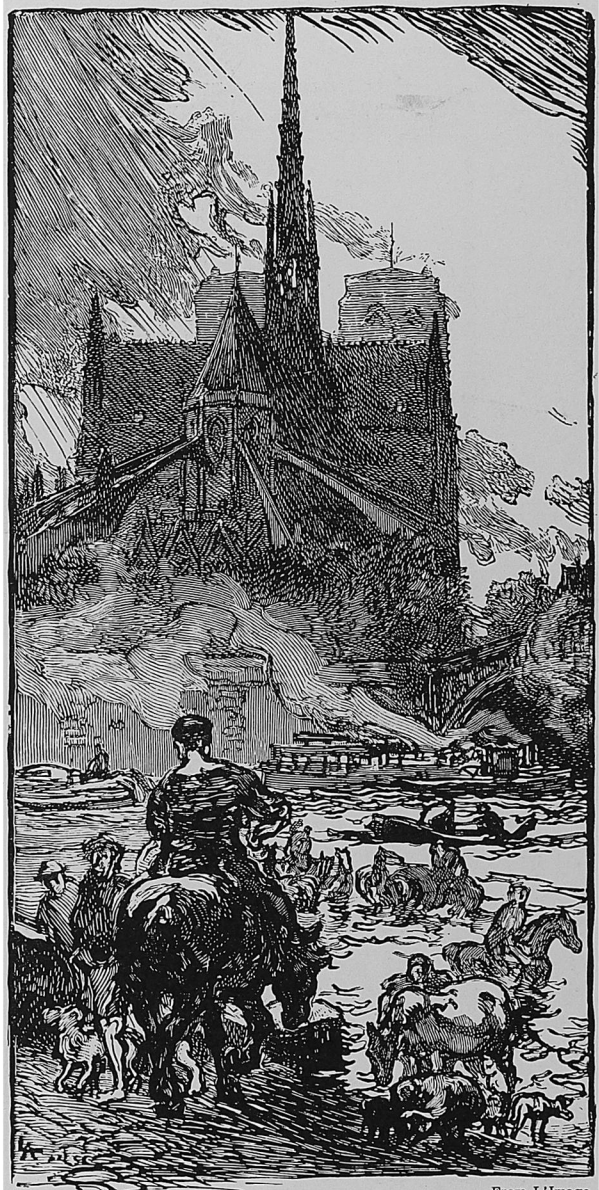
shall see the future master of French engraving, son of a sculptor, apprenticed by his father, at the age of twelve, in the workshop of the engraver, Sweeton. At eighteen, he became a workman. From taste, he leaned toward painting, and, in the Salon of 1870, he exhibited his first canvas.

After the war, however, he displayed great activity,—for one must live, and the "Grand Art" does not furnish one with provisions, in France. He worked obscurely, not yet being more than the skilful engraver, who reproduces the art of others, at a time when the commercial processes derived from photography had not yet invaded the domain of art publications. He also contributed to the *Magasin Pittoresque* and the *Monde Illustré*, being shop-foreman on the latter periodical. Even so recently, how much talent used to be wasted in this way; but, on the other hand, how happily inspired could be a vocation in constant contact with the compositions of those two celebrated illustrators, Edmond Morin and Daniel Vierge! One would, perhaps, be tempted to deplore the fact that, owing to the perfecting of modern inventions, this would be a lost art, or nearly so, if the example of Auguste Lepère did not prove that all things are revived and that today new conceptions or the unexpected return

of the oldest and most delightful methods can very well exist side by side with the most up-to-date machinery, the enormous and frequent editions, the well-known processes continually being improved for the popularizing of works of art.

Lepère was married in 1887. About 1884, the artist produced his first original engravings. They soon attracted attention and appreciations were given in the illustrated magazines, in the *Revue de l'Exposition de 1889*, in *Harper's Magazine* and in *Black and White*. He had not long to wait for honors. In 1889, it was the Gold Medal; in 1890, a traveling scholarship. In 1889, he began his first etching. At this time, in order to devote himself entirely to his researches and studies for original creations, he gave up his duties as shop-foreman, and henceforth, worked as his own master, in most happy fashion and in realms most diversified—I might even say, the most unexplored, of his art.

Lo, one day, he was found applying to the flat surfaces of bindings, the deep incisions familiar to the wood-engraver, varying the coloring of leather by treating it with acids, as, obviously, the processes of the aquatint and the etching could suggest to him; ornamenting large vases with little figures and landscapes—results obtained by processes which were his own; and even going so far as trying to invent a new style of character for printing types, in order to have the appearance of the text more nearly correspond to the spirit of the picture. If he did not realize this last project, he at least insisted upon printing in his own shop, the works which he had undertaken to illustrate, being in despair of having his wishes carried out by the regular printers. For the perfecting of the art of the making of books occupied a particularly important place in his æsthetic thoughts. He dreamed of a more complete and closer relation between the literary work and its plastic realization. In order to accomplish this the more securely, the choice of paper, even the arrangement of the text around



From L'Image
NOTRE DAME. FROM AN ILLUSTRATION ENGRAVED
ON WOOD BY AUGUSTE LEPÈRE

his drawings, were points over which he watched, as he did over the inking, of which he broke the uniformity (for he deplored uniformity) by varying its tones, as in the old books or, better still, in the very old manuscript missals. The best artists and the most enlightened lovers of art applauded the ingenuity of his efforts. Bracquemond, enthusiastic over the wood-engravings of Lepère, encouraged him along the way of decorative art; Louis Morin praised his quality of vision, his knowledge of values, ranging from



Courtesy Ed. Sagot, Edit., Paris

PÈRE DU SOLDAT. FROM A WOOD-ENGRAVING BY AUGUSTE LEPÈRE



LA MORT SUR LA MONDE. FROM A WOOD-ENGRAVING
BY AUGUSTE LEPÈRE

intense black, velvety or brilliant, to the transparency of the lightest grays (*L'Artiste*, 1894). Above all, Roger Marx, who devoted to him such beautiful pages in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, always saw in him the rival of Jongkind and—to go further back among the Dutch—an actual disciple of the old Rembrandt.

In gratitude, when, in 1910, the artist was named Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, he would have no other sponsor than Roger Marx; and when, in 1912, he became Officier of the same Order, he recalled that it was to this great critic that he owed the illustrating of *La Bièvre* et *Saint Séverin* and *A Rebours*.

In these two works, the adaptation of the picture to the text is so perfect, and, it must also be admitted, the prose of Huysmans is so suggestive of the plastic, that one wonders at times whether, by one of those transpositions dear to Baudelaire, it be not the writer who graves into the pear-wood to get a measure of the reserve stocks, where the fundamental blacks and whites are matched to

the heavy and dull atmosphere of a smoky Paris of the suburbs. Or else one wonders whether it is not Lepère who takes the pen and depicts the sadness of the Quartier des Gobelins, the melancholy burying of the Bièvre under the tottering and tattered tanneries, or the striking chiaro-oscuro of a night lodging-house, the dark and winding streets, which, at that time, still surrounded the decrepit and picturesque basilica dedicated to Saint Séverin.

In *A Rebours*, the engraver on wood and the engraver on copper collaborate. More than that, the painter intervenes,—a formidable task, for, in order to bring out the shades of the artist's dream, each page requires twenty-five or thirty colors.

A realist, yes, but a sentimental realist! The engraver, while assimilating from all sources, preserves his entire independence of expression and the thought of the author. His *Eloge de la Folie* from Erasmus, as well as his illustrations of the two *Contes* of Guy de Maupassant, are proofs of this.



KULTUR. FROM ONE OF THE LATEST WOOD-ENGRAVINGS BY AUGUSTE LEPÈRE



Courtesy Les Arts Français
FROM THE LAST WOOD-ENGRAVING. BY AUGUSTE
LEPÈRE

But he had a special fondness for the corners of old Paris; they were prints, under a sky, often hazy, of compelling and picturesque interest. It is not always the country of intense sun and joyous light that most inspires an engraver. The delicate skies of Florence and those of Lorraine, which the graver of Callot reproduced; the wet skies of England, low and, as it were, bathing the earth in an atmosphere of the studio; the skies of Belgium and, above all, of Holland, suit those who seek the *chiaroscuro*, as one of the principal effects to be obtained.

When he left Paris, Auguste Lepère was attracted by the animation of the fairs and markets of Normandy, for he scarcely separated nature and architecture from human beings, or by the misty and sinuous stream of the Dordogne.

From 1882 to 1893, he contemplated nature and meditated at Jean le Mou-tiers, in Seine et Oise; and from 1893 in Les Vendée and at Saint Jean des Monts. He loved the beautiful masses of trees, the beauty of their structure and the shadows which they shed and disperse and with which they are wrapped. He interpreted their charm in the sketches which he brought back from the forest of Fontainebleau; the Valley of Franchard, the Burners of Heather (1886).

Occasionally, like the exquisite Corot, he introduced nude figures in his compo-

sitions. He did this with an anatomical assurance which well revealed the son of the sculptor in him.

But it is particularly what I might call his landscapes of cities that bear the stamp of his talent in its most delightful and remarkable aspect. Paris, especially, holds a royal place in his work. Already, in an album of fifty sketches, the beloved city was prominent, alongside of those of Vendée, Ile de France and Italy. It was his only subject in a series of publications: *Paysages parisiens* (1894), *Paris au hasard* (1895). *Paris almanach* (1897), and *Dimanches parisiens* (1898). For the man that has lived even temporarily in that wholly spiritual light which the mist of the Seine diffuses, to know the works of Auguste Lepère is the natural complement of an initiation into art and sentiment.

Other towns had the rare fortune of having their aspects perpetuated—and these aspects were varied, in a way, mobile and in another unchanging (for, with the same setting, the light perpetually varies): Rouen, Marseille, Nantes and Amiens, not forgetting those fascinating, peaceful little towns: Beauvais and Provins.

Auguste Lepère loved art passionately. Especially did he love his own art, which



FROM A WOOD-ENGRAVING BY AUGUSTE LEPIÈRE FOR
"MARCHES NORMANDS" PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIÉTÉ
DES BIBLIOPHILES NORMANDS



AN ILLUSTRATION ENGRAVED ON WOOD. BY AUGUSTE LEPÈRE FROM "CHANAAN"

is an honest though rather austere and monachal one, inasmuch as it demands sacrifice (for one must make a choice of details and have patience until the final proof, at last, issues, all wet from the press).

In 1902, when the master presided and organized the exposition of wood-engraving at Ecole des Beaux Arts, he opposed the intrusion of painting, or rather, of painters ignorant of the art of illustration in the publication of books.

It can truly be said of him that he was the complete realization of a perfect artist, such as were to be seen in the times of the Companies of the Middle Ages: wood-engraver, painter, ceramist, illustrator, aqua fortist, lithographer, copperplate printer, binder, and typographical printer. He entrusted to no one but himself the care of developing his thought until it could be given out, perfectly

interpreted either by aqua fortis or dry point, or by the graving tool.

Of whatever period of his life one considers the works, one finds them individual. But, as M. Claude Roger Marx notes in an especially fine article, which he devotes to the master engraver (*Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Paris, January-March, 1919): it was, above all, towards the end of his life that the artist attained the "grand style."

Having taken up every branch and sub-branch of his art, he was familiar with the various forms of technique, which reacted one upon the other and enriched his art by new contributions. This enabled him to express himself all the better, inasmuch as he was thus able to express himself more diversely.

Having begun with the use of the most restricted and exacting processes, when he was engraving the plates of the *Monde Illustré*, he ended, from choice,

by adopting the most simple (in appearance); wood-engraving. But, to such a degree of perfection did he elevate that art, by adapting it to the traditional role—the embellishment of books—that the only reproach one could bring against this artist would be that he makes us lose the realization of effort. This last gives, in effect, a certain romantic ruggedness, a certain sad and morbid sense of tragedy, where artists are not possessed of the sovereign calm, due to a complete mastery of the craft.

By that alone, Auguste Lepère is indeed of France and of the capital of

France. Less *sui generis*, doubtless, less surprising than a Holbein or an Albert Dürer, or even than a Tony Johannot, he delights the man who contemplates him, by the sureness of his stroke, the suppleness of his drawing, and the strength and the truth of the final result. There all things appear in their proper places, in their proper light and with their respective values, graduated according to a genius which is almost prodigious.

Especially in the realm of the illustrating of books, he opened up a marvelous avenue, down which, already, others whom we love, are wandering.



To Artemis

BY GARDNER TEALL

I have no honey-cakes for thee, O Artemis!
 Other than my fidelity,
 Nor to thy snowy altar do libation bring
 To crimson it with sacrificial dole.
 Instead, the blood that purpleth these veins
 Shall, coursing, be my offering,
 Each quickening heartbeat be the pledge
 Of vows eternal my lips make to thee.
 Surely, calm goddess of this sylvan dell,
 Thou wilt not scorn thy votary!
 No wreath of forest flowers, trillium pale,
 Moonwort, anemone I weave!
 Thou shalt have chaplet in the prayers I breathe,
 Of buds plucked from the inmost garden of my soul!
 Ah, thou dost answer me! Thy crystal voice
 Speaketh from out the waters of this pool!
 Thou art not angered, then, that I
 In place of sacrifice do give thee just myself!